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ABSTRACT

This report reviews studies on social interactions in desegregated schools and synthesizes reports on differences in the experience of schooling of black females as compared to schooling of white females. The literature on the subject, though sparse, indicates that in the early grades both white and black females have a lot in common, despite some cultural differences in behavioral style. Teachers reinforce the academic behavior of white females and the social behavior of black females. Self-perceptions and evaluations of other pupils are affected by the teachers' differential treatment. By middle school, perceived similarity becomes an increasingly important criteria in friendship selection, so cross-racial friendships are inhibited. Females interact with a smaller number of classmates than do males, further restricting cross-racial friendships. Teachers fail to teach bi-racial friendship strategies. On the whole, however, teachers are probably unaware of this differential treatment. The following recommendations for change are made: (1) teachers should be made aware of their behavior; (2) teachers should learn about the cultural and behavioral differences among children; and (3) future studies should determine whether differences between white and black females are a result of racial, social, class, or ethnic variables. A list of references is included. (PS)

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COMPARISON OF BLACK AND WHITE FEMALES' BEHAVIOR IN ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOLS*

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COMPARISON OF BLACK AND WHITE FEMALES' BEHAVIOR
IN ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOLS

As has often been noted, the literature on the effects of desegregation is mixed. Many attribute these disparate findings to methodological problems and/or a lack of theoretical frameworks. Yet one feature common to all this research is that it examines the effects of desegregation by race. While this is obviously essential, it is limited. A major area which has not been seriously addressed is the effects of desegregation on gender; this is true inspite of the fact that one of the few constant findings across many desegregation studies is that black females are the most socially isolated group within schools. Many researchers appear to have assumed that race is the only predictor of differences between students. Others have taken an additional step and included gender within their analyses thus providing contrasts between males and females as well as whites and blacks. But only a few studies have included consideration of race-gender differences. And, unfortunately, these findings are not readily accessible to educators. They are scattered across a host of studies; moreover, given their titles and assigned descriptors, they are not easily retrievable even with the aid of computer searchers. Thus, we know very little about the impact of desegregation on white females as opposed to black females or

white versus black males. This study sought to rectify this void in our knowledge base by reviewing the studies on social interactions in desegregated schools and synthesizing reported differences in the experience of schooling of black and white females. To do this, the academic and social roles played by females as they interacted with classmates and teachers were traced over 13 years of public schooling.

Method

The literature reviewed for this study, with few exceptions, was published between 1978 and 1984. It was felt that by 1978 most schools would have been desegregated at least a year before the research was conducted. Preliminary studies on social interactions within desegregated classrooms were identified through computer searches of ERIC, *Sociological Abstracts* and *Pyschological Abstracts* using the following descriptors: school desegregation, school segregation, classroom desegregation, contact theory, classroom desegregation, multicultural education, sex differences, racial relations, cultural differences, review of desegregation, bibliographies. Combination descriptors, such as sex differences by school desegregation, were also requested. These searchers resulted in the identification of 226 articles and reports. Books were identified using computer searches of the university's libary collection; 11 books were identified in this manner. An additional 20 articles were identified from the

bibliographies of reviewed articles and books. Recent research on children's friendships also was reviewed to complement the desegregation literature identified through the above process.

The overwhelming majority of the identified studies did not include data on race-gender differences. In fact, few even included contrasts between males and females as well as whites and blacks. Findings in those studies which did include race-gender differences were coded for educational level and type of interaction. Educational levels were: lower elementary, upper-elementary, and middle school/junior high. The interaction variables were coded as: pupil-pupil within classrooms and other educational environments, and teacher-pupil in classrooms. It was initially anticipated that other variables also would be coded. However, the literature on race/gender differences was too sparse to make this feasible. There was enough research available, though, to describe and contrast behaviors of black females and white females by educational levels. Teacher behaviors associated with each level were also identified.

Results

The major findings, by educational level, are described below.

Early Elementary Grades

Student Behavior.

Black and white females enter school with more similarities than differences. Both tend to play in large groups, to choose girls as best friends, and want to do well academically. But there are some observeable differences between them. For instance, black females tend to be task oriented in their interactions with teachers while white females seek to establish personalized relationships with them. As an outgrowth of their task orientation, black females actively promote compliance among classmates with classroom rules. Consequently, they have more varied peer contacts than any other race-gender group.

The literature also indicates that black and white girls, even at first grade, tend to respond to aggression differently. When confronted with aggression black females retaliate verbally or physically whereas white females tend to comply, backdown, or withdraw.

Teacher Behavior.

While black and white females were found to be very similar in the early grades, teacher behavior toward them was clearly differentiated. The research literature indicates that teachers tend to reinforce academic behavior among white females and social behavior among black females. For instance, teachers ask black females to help classmates with nonacademic tasks and white

females to help with academic ones.

Perhaps most thought provoking is the finding that teachers provide different explanations for the similar achievement of black females and white males. The black females are seen as achieving up to their ability whereas the white males are described as immature and thus not yet working up to potential. As a consequence of these perceptual differences, unconscious teacher behaviors may be contributing to the development of the low academic self-esteem and achievement noted among black females in upper grades.

Upper Elementary Grades

Student Behavior.

At this educational level girls have begun to play principally in triads and dyads rather than large groups. Differences in behavior between black and white females become more apparent. For example, in contrast to white females, black females use extensive body movements in intragroup activities (e.g., rhythm games); continue to be physically aggressive; begin to see themselves as less socially powerful than other students with teachers and peers; and begin to exhibit low academic self-esteem. This later finding is particularly disturbing since black females' actual achievement is higher than black males and comparable to that of white males. Nevertheless, they consistently see themselves as less academically able than their classmates. At

the same time that black females are lowering their self-expectations, white females have begun to see themselves as academically more competent than any other race-gender group.

During these upper elementary years sex remains more important than race when choosing friends. That is, children are more likely to cross race barriers than sex barriers in choosing playmates. However, both white and black females tend to misinterpret the friendship approaches of opposite race females. This misinterpretation leads to a decrease in interactions between them. In fact, the friendship groups of white females during these years are more racially segregated than would be predicted by chance. What is interesting in this finding is that length of time in desegregated schooling does not affect the likelihood of choosing opposite race friends.

Teacher Behavior.

Teachers continue to reinforce the social behaviors of black females and the academic behavior of white females. Moreover, they tend to perceive black females as needing more academic assistance than comparable ability classmates. This was found to be true for both black and white teachers; however, black teachers did send more academic messages to black females than did white teachers.

In a few studies reviewed, teachers did make efforts to promote interracial interaction; however, their efforts tended to

reinforce stereotypes. For instance, in one study the teacher asked several of the white females to help blacks with academic work while asking one of the black females to teach one of the shy, white females in the class how to dance.

In general, black and white teachers both reinforced achievement related behaviors of opposite-race males more than same-race males, and both reinforced academic behaviors of black females less than another race-gender group.

Junior High/Middle School

Student Behavior.

By junior high/middle school age the pattern of dyadic and triadic friendship groupings is well established among females, and race has become an important factor in choosing friends. In fact, perceived similarities in general have become important in friendship selections (e.g., social class, grade-point average). Additionally, black females continue to be more physically assertive than white females. As a result, both groups of females tend to cluster in racially homogeneous groups. Interestingly, this is not the case for either black or white males who interact in large groups which play competitive sports.

Both white and black females have now become interested in boys and want to be attractive to them. This interest focuses much of the interaction among females at this age. But rather than providing a common ground for black-white female interaction,

this interest serves to drive them further apart. For a number of reasons, black females and white males are not attracted to each other whereas, some white females and black males become recognized couples. This results in rivalry between the white and black females.

The combination of the above differences functions to make adolescent black females the most socially isolated group in the school by this age.

Teacher Behavior.

Black females continue to receive less academically oriented reinforcement from teachers than do white females.

Discussion

The literature detailing the behaviors and attitudes of black and white females is sparse. Moreover, there are no comparable studies of racial differences across educational levels. Therefore, it is difficult to accurately pinpoint those occurrences which lead white females to become socially and academically secure while black females report an increasingly lowered academic self-concept and greater social isolation the longer they attend school. Even given these limitations, it was still possible to identify in the desegregation literature variations in the educational experiences of black and white females which might be contributing to these differences.

In the early grades white and black females appear to have a

lot in common, though there are some cultural differences in behavioral styles. Nevertheless, teachers reinforce the academic behavior of white females and the social behavior of black females. Since the teacher is an important individual in the lives of most children, this differential treatment affects self-perceptions and evaluations made by other pupils. And, as children move through the upper elementary grades and into middle school, perceived similarity becomes an increasingly important criteria in friendship selection. Thus, the teacher's differentiation in treatment of black and white females, by heightening perceptions of dissimilarity, reduces the potential for the development of cross-race friendships among them.

Exacerbating these differences is the structure of female friendship groups. Females tend to have small, exclusive friendships which they maintain across activities. This pattern is not noted for males, who tend to engage in large group activities such as basketball and baseball with group composition varing from activity to activity. Thus, females tend to interact with a smaller number of classmates than do males. This potentially restricts their cross-race interactions. Still, there were several attempts, noted in the literature, of females trying to make friends across racial lines. Unfortunately, cultural differences in interaction styles frequently led to misinterpretation by other-race females. At the same time,

teachers also appear to be unaware of social and cultural behavioral differences and thus fail to teach children bi-racial friendship strategies.

There is nothing in the literature to suggest that teachers are aware of the differential treatment which they are providing to black and white females. But they do it! Therefore, these data suggest several actions which have potential for increasing the academic self-concept and reducing the social isolation of black females. To begin with, teachers need to be made aware of their own behavior. Workshops designed to make teachers aware of the ways in which they differentially reinforce students and the resulting consequences need to be provided. Some knowledge of cultural, behavioral differences among children would also be helpful especially if they were complemented by a set of strategies teachers could use to help children read behavioral cues across racial lines.

As a result of the sparcity of studies available, the findings reported here are limited and suggestive only. Of the studies which did analyze race-gender differences, few provided sufficient demographic data to determine whether differences between white and black females were a result of race, social class, or other variables. Since there is some evidence that it is easier to promote cross-race friendships when social class is similar, the majority of a classes students are white, or when teacher pedagogical style promotes group interaction, it is recommended that future studies include these types of information.

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